

7 Gaslighting Phrases Malignant Narcissists, Sociopaths and Psychopaths Use To Silence You, Translated

Written by [Shahida Arabi, MA](#) on March 18, 2019

Gaslighting is an insidious erosion of your sense of reality; it creates a mental fog of epic proportions in the twisted “funhouse” of smoke, mirrors, and distortions that is an abusive relationship. When a malignant narcissist gaslights you, they engage in crazymaking discussions and character assassinations where they challenge and invalidate your thoughts, emotions, perceptions, and sanity. Gaslighting enables narcissists, sociopaths, and psychopaths to exhaust you to the point where you are unable to fight back. Rather than finding ways to healthily detach from this toxic person, you are sabotaged in your efforts to find a sense of certainty and validation in what youve experienced.

The term “gaslighting” originated in Patrick Hamiltons 1938 play, *Gas Light*, where a manipulative husband drove his wife to insanity by causing her to question what she experienced. It was further popularized in the 1944 film adaptation, *Gaslight*, a psychological thriller about a man named Gregory Anton who murders a famous opera singer. He later marries her niece, Paula to convince her she is going crazy to the point of being institutionalized, with the agenda of stealing the rest of her family jewels. According to Dr. George Simon, victims of chronic gaslighting can suffer from a wide array of side effects, including flashbacks, heightened anxiety, intrusive thoughts, a low sense of self-worth, and mental

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in order to evade accountability for their abuse. These perpetrators can use gaslighting callously and sadistically because they lack the remorse, empathy, or conscience to have any limits when they terrorize you or covertly provoke you. Gaslighting by a malignant narcissist is covert murder with clean hands, allowing the perpetrator to get away with their mistreatment while depicting the victims as the abusers.

I've spoken to thousands of survivors of malignant narcissists who have shared their stories of gaslighting, and below I include the most commonly used phrases malignant narcissists, sociopaths, and psychopaths employ to terrorize and deplete you, translated into what they really mean.

These phrases, when chronically used in the context of an abusive relationship, serve to demean, belittle and distort the reality of abuse victims.

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own disordered ways of thinking and behaving.

Malignant narcissists play the smirking doctors to their victims, treating them like unruly patients. Diagnosing their victims with mental health issues for having emotions is a way to pathologize their victims and undermine their credibility; this is even more effective when abusers are able to provoke reactions in their victims to convince society that they are the ones with mental health problems. According to the National Domestic Violence Hotline, some abusers will even actively drive their victims to the edge to concoct proof of their instability. The Hotline estimates that around 89% of their callers have experienced some form of mental health coercion and that 43% had experienced a substance abuse coercion from an abuser.

Most survivors who reported their abusive partners had actively contributed to mental health difficulties or their use of substances also said their partners threatened to use the difficulties or substance use against them with important authorities, such as legal or child custody professionals, to prevent them from obtaining custody or other things that they wanted or needed. *The National Center on Domestic Violence and the Domestic Violence Hotline*

2. You're just insecure and jealous.

Translation: I enjoy planting seeds of insecurity and doubt in your mind

about your attractiveness, competence, and mental health. I want you to

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Manufacturing love triangles and harems are a narcissist's forte. Robert Greene, author of *The Art of Seduction*, speaks about creating "an aura of desirability" which stirs a frenzied sense of competition among potential suitors. In abuse survivor communities, this tactic is also known as triangulation. It grants malignant narcissists a depraved sense of power over their victims. They actively provoke jealousy in their intimate partners in order to control them and paint them as unhinged when they finally react. When a victim calls out a narcissist's infidelity in any way, it is common for them to label the victims insecure, controlling, and jealous to avoid suspicion and to continue to reap the benefits of multiple sources of attention, praise, and ego strokes.

Remember: to someone who has something to hide, everything feels like an interrogation. Narcissists will often lash out in narcissistic rage, stonewalling, and excessive defensiveness when confronted with evidence of their betrayals.

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Translation: It's not that you're too sensitive, but rather that I am *insensitive*, callous, and unempathic. I do not care about your emotions unless they serve me in some way. Your negative reactions provide me stimulation and pleasure, so please, do keep going. I enjoy putting you down for having legitimate reactions to my abuse.

According to Dr. Robin Stern, one of the effects of gaslighting include asking yourself Am I too sensitive? a dozen times a day. Claiming that victims are overreacting or oversensitive to emotional abuse is a popular way for malignant narcissists to override your certainty about the severity of the abuse you experienced.

Whether or not someone is a sensitive person is irrelevant when it comes to cases of psychological or physical violence. Abuse affects anyone and everyone of varying sensitivity levels, and its impact should not be taken lightly. A mark of a healthy partner is that they give you the space to feel your emotions and provide emotional validation, even if they do not agree with you. A malignant narcissist will excessively focus on your so-called sensitivity and consistently claim that you are overreacting rather than own their horrific actions when called out, regardless of how "sensitive" you may be.

4. It was just a joke. You have no sense of humor.

Translation: I love disguising my abusive behavior as just jokes. I like calling you names, putting you down, and then claiming *you're* the one who lacks the sense of humor to appreciate my depraved "wit." Making you feel defective allows me to say and do whatever I wish, all with a smile and a derisive laugh.

Disguising cruel remarks, off-color comments, and put-downs as "just

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owning their vicious verbal assaults. You are then gaslighted into believing that it is your inability to appreciate the “humor” behind their cruelty, rather than the reality of its abusive intentions.

“Just jokes” are also used to test boundaries early on in an abusive relationship; what you may have rationalized as a tone-deaf or off-color comment in the beginning can escalate into psychological violence quite quickly in the hands of a narcissist. If you find that you have a partner who laughs at you more than they laugh *with* you, run. It will not get better.

5. You need to let it go. Why are you bringing this up?

Translation: I haven’t given you enough time to even process the last heinous incident of abuse, but you need to let it go already so I can move forward with exploiting you without facing any consequences for my behavior. Let me love-bomb you into thinking that things will be different this time around. Don’t bring up my past patterns of abusive behavior, because you’ll then recognize that this is a cycle that will just continue.

In any abuse cycle, it’s common for an abuser to engage in a hot-and-cold cycle where they periodically throw in crumbs of affection to keep you hooked and to renew hope for a return to the honeymoon phase. This is a manipulation tactic known as intermittent reinforcement, and it’s common for an abuser to terrorize you, only to return the next day and act like nothing has happened. When you *do* recall any abusive incidents, an abuser will tell you to “let it go” so they can sustain the cycle.

This form of abuse amnesia adds onto your addictive bond to the abuser, also known as “trauma bonding.” According to Dr. Logan (2018), Trauma

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6. You're the problem here, not me.

Translation: I am the problem here, but I'll be damned if I let you know it! I'd rather subject you to personal attacks as you bend over backwards trying to hit constantly moving goalposts and arbitrary expectations of the way I think you *should* feel and behave. As you spend most of your time trying to fix your fabricated flaws while always coming up short of what I deem "worthy," I can just sit back, relax, and continue to mistreat you the way I feel entitled to. You won't have any energy left to call me out.

It's common for abusive partners to engage in malignant projection – to even go as far as to call their victims the narcissists and abusers, and to dump their own malignant qualities and behaviors onto their victims. This is a way for them to gaslight their victims into believing that they are the ones at fault and that their reactions to the abuse, rather than the abuse itself, is the problem. According to Narcissistic Personality clinical expert Dr. Martinez-Lewi, these projections tend to be psychologically abusive. As she writes, "The narcissist is never wrong. He {or she} automatically blames others when anything goes awry. It is very stressful to be the recipient of narcissistic projections. The sheer force of the narcissists accusations and recriminations is stunning and disorienting."

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to wonder if you're going crazy, rather than pinpointing the evidence which proves I am an abuser.

In the movie *Gaslight*, Gregory causes his new wife to believe that her aunts house is haunted so she can be institutionalized. He does everything from rearranging items in the house, flickering gas lights on to making noises in the attic so she is no longer able to discern whether or not what she's seeing is real. He isolates her so that she is unable to gain validation. After manufacturing these crazymaking scenarios, he then convinces her that these events are all a figment of her imagination.

Many victims of chronic gaslighting struggle with the cognitive dissonance which occurs when their abuser tells them that they never did or said something. Much like reasonable doubt can sway a jury, even the hint that something may *not* have happened after all can be powerful enough to override someone's perceptions. Researchers Hasher, Goldstein and Toppino (1997) call this the "illusory truth effect" – they discovered that when falsehoods are repeated, they are more likely to be internalized as true simply due to the effects of repetition. That is why continual denial and minimization can be so effective in convincing victims of gaslighting that they are indeed imagining things or suffering from memory loss, rather than standing firm in their beliefs and experiences.

The Big Picture

In order to resist the effects of gaslighting, you must get in touch with your own reality and prevent yourself from getting entrapped into an endless loop of self-doubt. Learn to identify the red flags of malignant narcissists and their manipulation tactics so you can get out of disorienting, crazymaking conversations with malignant narcissists *before* they escalate into wild accusations, projections, blameshifting and put-

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as they happened, rather than how your abuser tells you they happened. Save text messages, voicemails, e-mails, audio or video recordings (if permitted in your state laws) which can help you to remember the facts in times of mental fog, rather than subscribing to the distortions and delusions of the abuser.

Engage in extreme self-care by participating in mind-body healing modalities which target the physical as well as psychological symptoms of the abuse. Recovery is important to achieve mental clarity. Enlist the help of a third party, such as a trauma-informed therapist, and go through the incidents of abuse together to anchor yourself back to what you've experienced. Malignant narcissists might attempt to rewrite your reality, but you don't have to accept their twisted narratives as truth.

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FEEDBACK:  

Histrionic Personality in Relationships: Challenges and How to Cope

Medically reviewed by [Matthew Boland, PhD](#) — Written by [Hope Gillette](#) — Updated on June 24, 2022

[Living with histrionic personality](#) [Histrionic behaviors](#)

[Relationship challenges](#) [Dating tips](#) [Next steps](#)

Dating someone with a histrionic personality may mean handling unpredictable behaviors and over-the-top displays of emotion. Ignoring them may not be the best

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partner whose level of emotionality feels extreme or disproportionate to the situation, or who seems to always need to be the focus of attention.

But relationships with a histrionic personality can succeed once you learn more about the condition and understand that ignoring them might not be the way to go.

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What it's like to live with histrionic personality disorder (HPD)

[Histrionic personality disorder \(HPD\)](#) is a cluster B personality disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5th edition (DSM-5).

It shares similar features with other [personality disorders](#) like [narcissistic personality disorder \(NPD\)](#) and [borderline personality disorder \(BPD\)](#).

Like all the [cluster B conditions](#), histrionic personality may involve significant emotional regulation challenges, such as excessive displays of emotion along with unpredictable behaviors that others might find to be

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These behaviors are mostly not intentional or a personal choice. Most likely, attention-seeking behaviors are the product of past experiences and a reinforced pattern that has become “second nature.”

How does a histrionic personality behave?

When you’re dating someone with histrionic personality disorder, you may notice a tendency to behave in ways that attract attention. Not everyone will repeat the same behaviors but some examples may include:

- dressing in outfits that may be considered “over the top” in your culture
- engaging in provocative or sexual behavior with others even when not interested
- expressing thoughts and emotions in dramatic ways to maintain everyone’s focus on them
- “fishing” for compliments
- embellishing, fabricating, or exaggerating stories
- displaying emotions publicly that may seem disproportionate to the given situation

“People who have HPD love to be the center of attention, the life of the party,” explains [Dr. Raffaello Antonino](#), a counseling psychologist from London.

Recurrent attention-seeking behaviors may lead you to believe that ignoring a histrionic personality is the only way to go. But, ignoring your partner with a histrionic personality may increase their emotional distress and in turn increase the chance of more attention-seeking behaviors

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Relationship challenges when your partner has HPD

Behaviors that aim to get attention can sometimes cause conflict in a relationship if you don't understand where they're coming from.

Underneath histrionic personality, there's a wide range of intense emotions that cause the person great distress. Some of the histrionic behaviors come from this emotionality that's difficult for the person to manage.

If your partner is constantly seeking attention from everyone, it may make you wonder about the depth of your connection, or if they might one day go too far. It's natural to feel this way. But histrionic behaviors are often a facade and don't necessarily mean your partner doesn't love you or respect you.

The histrionic relationship cycle can be different in every relationship. It could involve self-sabotaging behaviors, like flirting or arguing, followed by efforts to regain your approval and attention.

If your partner lives with HPD, they may push you away with their actions and then miss your attention when you take a step back.

You may also feel incline to ignore some histrionic behaviors and then

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The recurrent sexually provocative behaviors, like flirting, may be a significant challenge for some people in relationships with someone with a histrionic personality.

While this doesn't necessarily mean your partner will inevitably be unfaithful, you could feel these behaviors still cross relationship boundaries.

The DSM-5 indicates sexually provocative behavior in histrionic personality can be present even when your partner has no real romantic interest in another person. The goal of histrionic behaviors is getting attention, not receiving affection, physical contact, or intimacy.

Arguments

You may find that your histrionic partner may often shift from an emotional state to an opposite one. Maybe some of these changes seem superficial or uncalled to you. On some occasions, you may be dealing with emotional outbursts, sometimes in public places.

This unpredictable emotional aspect of a relationship with a histrionic personality can contribute to the frequency and intensity of [endless arguments](#).

Dishonesty

A partner with histrionic personality disorder may take a "do what it takes" approach when it comes to gaining attention.

This can come in the form of embellishing stories or telling outright lies they feel will work to their advantage.

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People with histrionic personality disorder may sometimes use [manipulation tactics and behaviors](#) to claim the attention they may feel they're losing.

[Dr. Holly Schiff](#), a licensed clinical psychologist from Connecticut, says partners with HPD will often seek to use emotional manipulation in relationships. This may leave you confused and frustrated.

5 tips for dating someone with histrionic personality disorder

HPD is a mental health disorder that can impair daily life. It often requires the guidance of a therapist for symptoms to improve.

But that doesn't mean that both partners can make an effort to make your relationship work. Empathy, patience, and trust can go a long way in supporting each other.

Remember, ignoring someone with histrionic personality disorder may be a natural reaction but it often isn't what's required in the situation.

Here are 5 tips to consider when dating someone living with HPD:

1. Remaining calm

The extreme emotions that often come with a histrionic personality can cause knee-jerk reactions. If your partner suddenly starts yelling at you, for example, you may naturally want to react to that.

Schiff recommends reminding yourself to [be calm](#), above all else.

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Abandoning them might also be counterproductive. You may want to express your emotions and confirm you still love them. Then, try to explain that you won't engage at the moment and prefer to discuss this problem later.

2. Communicating openly and directly

Communication is essential in any relationship, but may serve a more important role when your partner lives with HPD.

Antonino recommends [communicating openly](#) as a way of addressing all [relationship conflicts](#).

Your partner with a histrionic personality may be more likely to be mindful of your feelings when you express your concerns and set clear boundaries and expectations with them directly and openly.

"Let your partner know if you're not OK with this behavior," says Antonino. Explaining how the behavior makes you feel and the possible consequences it may have may be more helpful than criticizing it.

Following a stranger to an apartment, he says, can be a sign of HPD's suggestibility trait that may put your partner in a dangerous situation. Helping your partner become aware of the risks may help them think twice about following impulses.

3. Including your partner

Attention is a common motivator for histrionic behaviors. In a social setting, Antonino recommends taking a proactive approach to include your partner, which may help prevent them from feeling neglected.

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may hurt them. Doing this may also prevent them from engaging in attention-seeking behaviors.

4. Taking time for yourself

Alone and self-care time may be important to you, particularly after an argument or emotionally draining situation.

“Knowing when to distance yourself is important, since it can be difficult and overwhelming to deal with histrionic behaviors. You deserve a break and [time to care for yourself](#),” Schiff says.

Self-care can look like:

- spending some time with friends
- a walk in the park
- working out
- reading a book

It can be anything that brings you joy and fulfillment and promotes a sense of relaxation.

It’s important, though, that you let your partner know ahead of time when you plan to spend time away. Try to explain this isn’t a reflection of how you feel or that you don’t want to engage with them.

5. Setting boundaries

Both Schiff and Antonino recommend setting clear [relationship boundaries](#).

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People with a histrionic personality typically have limited self-awareness and may sometimes overlook some of their potentially sabotaging behaviors. Your partner may not always realize that their actions can hurt you, for example. So, letting them know can help.

Setting boundaries also lets your partner know what they can expect from you when conflict arises. This may help control reactions of shock, anger, or surprise if a boundary gets crossed.

Next steps

Histrionic personality disorder is a diagnosable mental health condition. It may negatively impact your partner's life enough to make daily functioning a challenge. It could also affect your relationship, particularly if you don't understand some behaviors.

Neither of you has to work through these challenges alone.

Individual and couples therapy approaches can help you and your partner manage histrionic personality symptoms while helping you both come up with coping strategies and relationship boundaries.

Last medically reviewed on June 24, 2022

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